

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 26 | Issue 2

Article 8

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4-1-2009

## Woolhouse, LOCKE: A BIOGRAPHY

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### Recommended Citation

DeKrey, Gary (2009) "Woolhouse, LOCKE: A BIOGRAPHY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss2/8>

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*Locke: A Biography*, by Roger Woolhouse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xviii + 528. \$39.99 (cloth).

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Even for a philosophical genius, John Locke was an extraordinarily complicated person as well as a particularly elusive one. Roger Woolhouse reveals much of Locke's complexity in the first comprehensive biography of him to appear in fifty years. Woolhouse's strictly chronological approach enables readers to trace the development of Locke's thoughts on many subjects. Something is lost thereby in analysis of Locke's work, but this piecemeal treatment is justified by Locke's own manner of composing and presenting it. Despite his voluminous writing and note-taking, Locke published nothing until he was fifty-four. All his most important work appeared in the last fifteen years of his life, much of it in the *annus mirabilis* of 1689, when the first *Letter concerning Toleration*, the *Two Treatises of Government*, and the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* went to the printers. But each of these had seen a long gestation.

In the meantime, the former Oxford tutor enjoyed an active life that he never expected. His broad interests had increasingly focused on medicine and chemistry by the middle of the 1660s. However, the course of Locke's life was changed by a 1666 meeting with Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Ashley, Exchequer Chancellor, and soon to be Earl of Shaftesbury. Locke joined Shaftesbury's household; and the friendship that developed between the first great Whig politician and his doctor quickly expanded to encompass the entire range of political, religious, scientific, and philosophical interests they shared. That Locke composed the *Two Treatises* to justify Shaftesbury's defiance of Charles II's perceived promotion of "popery and arbitrary government" is well known. But the religious settlement of England was as hotly debated during Locke's time with Shaftesbury as the political settlement. Locke's 1667 "Essay concerning Toleration" (not published until the Victorian era) was, for instance, not merely a trial run of the arguments of his subsequent *Letter*. Its composition was also an early sign that moderate Anglicans hoped for reconciliation with dissenters through the substitution of comprehension and toleration for religious coercion. Similarly, the concern in the *Second Treatise* about a ruler's favoring that religion "readiest to introduce . . . arbitrary power" (Paragraph 210) represented more than 1680s' concerns about James II's Catholicism. It also reflected 1670s' Country concerns about a revival of Laudian "priestcraft" and "popery" within the Church of England. Indeed, the attack on Sir Robert Filmer's principles in the *First Treatise* expressed Locke's repudiation of the political philosophy of divine right Anglicanism, as Mark Goldie argues in one of several important articles that Woolhouse overlooks.<sup>1</sup>

Should we, then, conclude, with Richard Ashcraft, that a "radical"—and even a "revolutionary"—John Locke, one with strong connections to militant dissenters, was heavily involved in the opposition parliamentary politics of 1679–1681, in the conspiracies of 1681–1683, and in the intrigues of

<sup>1</sup>M. Goldie, "John Locke and Anglican Royalism," *Political Studies*, 31 (1983), pp. 61–85.

exiles in the Netherlands in 1683–1688? Despite Locke's clear involvement with Shaftesbury, with leading Whigs, and with fellow exiles, Woolhouse is generally as tight-lipped as the philosopher himself in discussing overt connections to controversial religious and political agendas. He does agree with John Marshall's and Mark Goldie's placement of Locke among moderate Anglicans.<sup>2</sup> But Woolhouse is not really interested in the debates among historians and students of political philosophy about where to locate Locke in his times. He ignores the flood of new writing about the Restoration since the 1980s. The history that he does provide is thin, and thin old-fashioned Whig history at that.

The merits of Woolhouse's book are rather to be found in its careful reconstructions of biographical details and of the early building blocks from which Locke's mature work emerged. Along the way, we learn much about the friendships of a man who clearly enjoyed exuberant company and bracing intellectual exchanges. In the Netherlands in 1683–1688, for instance, he was more intimately associated with academics like Philip van Limborch and Jean Le Clerc, who shared his interest in toleration, than with other English political exiles. In his last years, his residence in the Essex household of Sir Francis Masham kept him in the company of the daughter of Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, the philosophic Damaris, Lady Masham, with whom Locke had once considered marriage.

The difficulty of attaching precise labels to Locke is especially troublesome in deciphering his religious views, and Woolhouse—again following the philosopher himself—tells us next to nothing about Locke's religious practice. From his published work, we know that Locke never lost his early confidence that moral principles can generally be deduced from a God-given law of nature. He was equally confident that reason and divine revelation, as found especially in the Christian scriptures, are mutually supportive paths to understanding God. His strongest objections to Roman Catholicism included his aversion to doctrines, like transubstantiation, that seemed incompatible both with the testimony of the senses and with reason, which God's revelations might transcend but would never contradict.

The greatest alteration in Locke's early religious thought came after 1665, when, as secretary to an English legation, he observed Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics living together in peace in Cleves. Locke had, until then, assigned the magistrate coercive authority to regulate indifferent matters of religious practice about which divine intention could not be determined. But his German observations assuaged the fear, grounded in recent English history, that too much religious liberty would destroy the unity of the state in a chaos of sectarian disagreement. Consequently, in his 1667 "Essay," Locke maintained that the magistrate's sphere of competence is limited to civil matters. "Purely speculative opinions" in religion, including "belief of the Trinity," must be accorded "a perfect uncontrollable

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<sup>2</sup>R. Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics & Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton, 1986); J. Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 94–95, 99–100; M. Goldie, "John Locke, Jonas Proast and Religious Toleration 1688–1692," in *The Church of England, c.1689–c.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, ed. J. Walsh, et. al. (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 143–171.

liberty," he argued, since they neither threatened the state nor the rights of others. Moreover, he insisted that religious devotion must be offered "to that God I adore in a way I judge acceptable to him." The use of the first-person pronoun in the last quotation indicates, as Woolhouse suggests, Locke's shift away from his earlier gloomy psychology to a greater confidence in human nature. Locke's approach to toleration also differed from that of many dissenters, who grounded their cases for toleration not in the "voluntary . . . choice of the mind" but rather in the bondage of the rational conscience to its reading of God's will. Nevertheless, and despite Locke's endorsement of the public "state-religion," his separation of religious and civil spheres challenged the privileges of the establishment, opened the door to pluralism, and contrasted sharply with the grudging toleration of 1689.<sup>3</sup> That so many Anglican authorities came to suspect Locke's religious views, despite his anonymous authorship of almost everything he published about religion, is, therefore, not so surprising, although Woolhouse largely skirts these historical contexts.

By the 1690s Locke was testily defending not only his Anglicanism but also his very Christianity. "A Christian I am sure I am," he fired off at one point, while also insisting that he would "quit any opinion of mine, as soon as I am shown that it is contrary to any revelation in the holy scripture." (*Works of Locke*, 1823, VII, p. 359; IV, p. 96). While Locke may have been sure about his faith, doubts have persisted among scholars loyal to early Christian and Reformation confessions. Woolhouse is particularly helpful in recounting Locke's exchanges with contemporary Anglican critics. Some of them were troubled by his dismissal, in the 1694 *Reasonableness of Christianity*, of belief in much historical doctrine, as necessary for salvation. Locke argued that true saving faith consisted in belief in an eternal creator God, the father of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead. To this he added genuine repentance for sin and a turning from sin to a virtuous life in response to the illumination of moral principles provided by Jesus. Christ rescues from the consequences of sin those with such a faith, restoring them to the eternal life God intended for humankind.

Locke's method for distilling these essentials of saving faith from the variety of other Christian beliefs separated the gospel teachings of Jesus from the remainder of the New Testament and from the church's early creedal statements. Among those extraneous beliefs was the doctrine of the Trinity, about which Locke said little in response to an Anglican reaction against a supposed wave of anti-Trinitarian thought in which he was assigned a central place. His New Testament exegesis was also offered in a language quite different from that in which Protestants had usually explained such matters as the incarnation, atonement, the provision of grace, and eternal life. He accepted the immortality of the soul, for instance, but he wondered about its immateriality; and although he accepted the "resurrection of the body," he was uncertain that the faithful would be raised in the same bodies. His discussions about human will and moral freedom contradicted the idea of original sin, while his rejection of innate ideas in the *Essay* was seen by some writers as an opening to moral relativism.

<sup>3</sup>"Essay concerning Toleration," in H. R. Fox Bourne, *The Life of John Locke*, 2 vols. (London, 1876), I, pp. 174–194, quoted at pp. 175–176, 177, 178, 192–193.

The clues to understanding Locke's Christianity are the hostility he shared with Shaftesbury to "priestcraft," or the burdening of faith with clerical impositions, and his understanding of Jesus as the authoritative revealer of moral truths that so often escape reason. Despite his connections to "freethinkers" and the suspicions of high-church Anglicans, Locke was no deist, although Woolhouse again shies away from precise judgment. His friendship, after the Glorious Revolution, with Archbishop John Tillotson points to his support for the archbishop's effort to shift Anglican emphasis from coercion and doctrinal dispute to the reformation of behavior in light of the gospel. Locke himself argued in 1689 that "No man can be a Christian without charity, and without that faith which works . . . by love" (*Letter*, 1690, p. 3). His non-creedal, "reasonable" Christianity and his adoption of toleration were answers to the excesses of sectarian "enthusiasm" as well as to those of intolerant churchmanship. In his preference for fundamental truths over theological squabbles, and in his emphasis upon a faith active in the practice of virtue, he was as much a herald of modern liberal Anglo-American Protestantism as he was the forerunner of modern political liberalism. All this can be gathered from Woolhouse's finely detailed biography; but as a biographer, Woolhouse too often advances detail over meaning.

*The Meaning of Theism*, edited by John Cottingham. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Pp. xi + 126. £17.99 (paper).

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This is the book version of the latest *Ratio* special issue (*Ratio* Vol. XIX, no. 4., Dec. 2006). As such, it is the latest in a series which, since the first appeared some twelve years ago (*Truth in Ethics*, ed. Brad Hooker 1995), has ranged widely across Philosophy. With this volume the focus turns to the philosophy of religion. More specifically, the avowed hope of the editor was that his contributors would 'write with an eye to what belief in God, or its absence, *means* for the subject—what difference it makes to the flow and perceived significance of someone's life' (p. x). As is traditional with these special issues and their book versions, the papers that were delivered at a one-day conference in Reading the preceding Easter are bulked out with others from invited contributors. In this case, the result is a collection of papers written from a variety of perspectives—Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Atheist, and Agnostic—most (but not all) of which keep one eye at least on what the editor hoped they would keep an eye on.

The full list of papers and their authors reads: "What's God Got To Do With It? Atheism and Religious Practice," by David Benatar; "What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Theistic Belief," by John Cottingham; "Philosophy, the Restless Heart and the Meaning of Theism," by John Haldane; "Worshipping an Unknown God," by Anthony Kenny; "Seeke True Religion. Oh, Where?," by Michael McGhee; "The Varieties of